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Ships of Honor

More Veterans Killed by Suicide than by Combat

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The public focuses on younger veterans committing suicide at an extremely high rate, but a recent article from the Center for Public Integrity highlights problems of older veterans, entitled, "*Suicide Rate for Veterans Exceeds That of the Civilian Population*" (<http://www.publicintegrity.org/2013/08/30/13292/suicide-rate-veterans-far-exceeds-civilian-population>). The article reports that 70% of veteran suicides are of veterans over age 50. It goes on to report that 1 in 5 suicides in America are committed by a veteran, with 49,000 individuals taking their own lives between 2005 and 2011 (more than all the servicemen killed in the three year Korean War which had 36,516 casualties).

The article continues: "Twenty (20) percent of the suicides in America are committed by veterans, who make up 10% of the population. Records for 48 states show the annual suicide rate among veterans is about 30 for every 100,000 of the population, compared to a civilian rate of about 14 per 100,000. The suicide rate among veterans increased an average of 2.6% a year from 2005-2011, or more than double than the 1.1% civilian rate."

When a reader drills down into VA statistics on suicide in the *Suicide Data Report, 2012 for the Department of Veterans Affairs Mental Health Services* (see: <http://www.va.gov/opa/docs/Suicide-Data-Report-2012-final.pdf>) one discovers that almost as many veterans died of suicide in a ten (10) year period from 2000-2010 (57,480) as were killed in the 10 year long Vietnam War (58,209).

Also, with a daily rate of 22 veteran suicides per day since 2009, this totals 8,030 veteran suicides a year, which presently exceeds in one year the total war deaths of the 13- year Iraq and Afghanistan wars combined, reported as 7,644 war deaths as of September 8, 2014 in a report on US War Death Statistics (see: <http://www.statisticbrain.com/u-s-war-death-statistics/>).



[com/u-s-war-death-statistics/](http://www.statisticbrain.com/u-s-war-death-statistics/)).

It quickly becomes obvious to anyone objectively looking at this veteran suicide problem: Our veterans stand a better chance of dying of suicide when they come home from war than they ever did in war-time battles.

The older veteran population (50+ years) are particularly vulnerable to committing suicide. Approximately 5,621 older veterans committed suicide each year since 2009. These veterans, long ago home from our wars, due to mental or physical health problems, unemployment or under-employment, family problems, CD abuse, homelessness, or chronic service connected disabilities, killed themselves.

In our culture, that favors "rugged individualism," few of us know our neighbors well enough or are engaged in their lives enough to know about their problems, let alone be ready to intervene and help them when they face these issues.

Many of our veterans who take their lives belong to veterans' organizations or churches which may be too superficially engaged with their members to notice and intervene in helping a veteran who is going through a dark time. My guess is many of these veterans who killed themselves have slipped through the cracks in this way.

For too long we have treated veterans like they are someone else's problem. We think, "These veterans belong to the military or the VA: Let them be responsible for them." These veterans are seen as the government's problem or the VA's problem...or DOD's problem, divorcing and disconnecting these veterans from our communities. Until we say in each community, "These veterans are OUR veterans and are OUR responsibility."

As much as the VA is doing to address this problem (and they are addressing the suicide issue), without the help of neighbors and

friends and congregational care systems having eyes and ears to see veterans in trouble in our communities, this problem will persist at scandalous levels. This problem of "let the other guy do it" is as old as the Biblical Story of The Good Samaritan from the Christian tradition.

On March 17, 2015, the Minneapolis Star Tribune in A Letter to the Editor ran an angry letter about a homeless veteran frozen to death in St. Paul, MN and no one noticed or cared, entitled "A Community Gathers to Show its Respect-After it is Too Late" (see: <http://www.startribune.com/opinion/letters/296498521.html>).

The Minneapolis Star-Tribune reprinted in its national news section an article from The New York Times April 1 edition of an article entitled, "Study: Military Suicides not Tied to Iraq, Afghanistan deployments" referencing a April 1, 2015 report of JAMA, the Journal of the American Medical Association (see: <http://www.startribune.com/lifestyle/health/298387151.html>). It underlines that the big issue of veteran suicide... is suicides, not just among the active military, but with discharged veterans, after their service.... sometimes years after their service.

The April 2015 JAMA study however found that the suicide rate for recently discharged troops who left the military before completing four years was nearly twice that of troops who stayed.

The suicide rate for troops who were discharged under less-than-honorable conditions was nearly three times higher, with most of these vulnerable veterans not being eligible for VA mental health services after being discharged.

Clergy and medical/mental health practitioners in our communities where these veterans return should be especially vigilant to veterans who were discharged before their term of service has expired: Those veterans who are given medical discharges, administrative discharges for reasons of unsuitability for service, and those with "less than honorable" discharges. Many of these veterans are not eligible for VA mental health or VA Chaplaincy services and may need other community mental health and faith group resources to sort out issues in their lives to reduce incidences of suicide among this population.

Our active duty, reserve, and National Guard chaplains need to find a way to get in on the discharge "check out" process for such troops and provide counsel and information on community resources for these early discharged veterans to access when they go home. With the suicide rate for early discharged veterans 2 to 3 times the

veteran suicide rate, taking some effort to assist here by a chaplain or medical officer may save more than one veteran's life and help reduce veteran suicide in our nation.

This should be a wake-up call for all of us of a problem that we may not have been aware of, seeing the stark statistics on veterans' suicides. But knowing the alarming number of suicides, we as members of veterans organizations and faith communities (along with the VA), need to organize and respond in multidisciplinary ways to address this problem and understand the multiple crises that lead a veteran to take his/her life after years of service to our country.

No veteran should stand a better chance of being killed by their own hand upon returning home from war than they faced from an enemy in a combat zone. There is just something wrong with this picture... and we can't just turn away from this problem.

Chaplain David Thompson is a retired U.S. Navy Chaplain who has worked extensively with returning veterans and is the co-author of "Beyond the Yellow Ribbon: Ministering to Returning Combat Veterans" (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009).

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